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Letter dated 22 March 2018 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to inform you of the current situation regarding the implementation of Security Council resolution 2401 (2018), with a focus on the Damascus suburb of eastern Ghouta — long overrun by terrorists who have been firing indiscriminately on Damascus city, including on Russian diplomatic missions, and perpetrating other crimes. Negotiations to end the confrontation are ongoing with those armed groups with which negotiations are possible.

Russia and Syria are doing their utmost to address the humanitarian problems in eastern Ghouta under extremely challenging circumstances. In line with Security Council resolution 2401 (2018), representatives of the Russian armed forces are carrying out an operation of unprecedented scale, the sole purpose of which is to help the residents of eastern Ghouta.

That effort has enabled the evacuation of more than 86,000 persons and the dispatch of three convoys of the United Nations, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the International Committee of the Red Cross through the established humanitarian corridors. Representatives of the United Nations have confirmed that the evacuation was voluntary.

The operation can be observed in real time. Cameras have been placed at the Wafidin Camp and Hammuriyah checkpoints, in northern and southern parts of eastern Ghouta, respectively, and in Harasta al-Basal.

Since the morning of 22 March, more than 5,000 civilians have exited through the Wafidin Camp checkpoint. In the past 24 hours alone, hot meals have been delivered to 8,000 residents of eastern Ghouta and 2,500 food parcels have been distributed. The staff of the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in the Syrian Arab Republic have been distributing hot food, food parcels, bottled drinking water and bedding (mattresses, blankets and pillows) at checkpoints and in refugee camps. Medical assistance is being provided.

At the same time, civilians have been returning to the liberated towns of Siqba and Kafr Batna. The staff of the Centre for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides are supplying these areas with humanitarian assistance and providing people with medical assistance.

We call on the United Nations and its humanitarian agencies to step up their coordination with the Syrian authorities to assist the evacuees and all civilian victims of the conflict. We recall that the Syrian authorities have officially requested that the

United Nations send humanitarian convoys to Tanf, which has been illegally occupied by the so-called coalition, and to send a mission to assess humanitarian needs in Raqqah, which was nearly razed to the ground following bombardments by that same coalition. We are counting on the United Nations to respond without delay.

Syrians escaping from areas under jihadist control have been describing extremist crimes and a prevailing atmosphere of lawlessness, including seizures of humanitarian assistance, the use of civilians as human shields and the obstruction of the voluntary evacuation.

It is disappointing that this information is being intentionally filtered out by those who would rather give currency to unverified and blatantly false materials, including allegations of chemical weapon use by government forces. Nefarious organizations such as the White Helmets have been supplying false information, as they have at other points during the Syrian crisis.

We would like to receive an answer to our repeated question about the sources of the statistical data used by the United Nations, for example, regarding the number of people in besieged and hard-to-reach areas, civilian casualties, and alleged attacks against medical and educational facilities. Reference to "credible sources on the ground" can hardly be considered a satisfactory explanation.

Illegal armed groups are continuing to sabotage the implementation of Security Council resolution 2401 (2018) in the eastern Ghouta de-escalation area. Here are some specific examples.

On 16 March, the Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam) group circulated videos in the media showing its fighters destroying a helicopter belonging to government forces in eastern Ghouta.

On 20 March, as a result of a counterattack against government troop positions, fighters operating in eastern Ghouta reportedly gained control of Misraba, 10 kilometres north-east of Damascus.

On 21 March, extremists reportedly shelled neighbourhoods in central Damascus (Qassa', Qusur, Bab Sharqi, Duwaliyah and Abbasiyin square), south-eastern Damascus (Bustan al-Dayr and Zablatani) and south-western Damascus. Five civilians were killed and two were injured in the Mazzah area. Fighters from Ayn Tarma in eastern Ghouta, an area under the control of Faylaq al-Rahman (Rahman Corps), also launched a rocket attack against the Kashkul market in Jaramana, a suburb of Damascus with a mostly Christian and Druze population. It is understood that 37 persons were killed and another 35 injured.

As agreed earlier with Army of Islam leaders, an offensive was launched on 19 March by Nusrah Front and Rahman Corps field commanders against the position of Syrian armed forces in order to draw some of the government troops towards them. The town of Mudayra, 4 kilometres north-east of Damascus, was seized, as was the terrain between Harasta and Duma, respectively 7 and 15 kilometres north-east of Damascus. The offensive was accompanied by heavy artillery, shelling and car bomb attacks.

At the same time, Ahrar al-Sham and Army of Islam field commanders proceeded to prepare attacks against government troop positions near Harasta and Shaffuniyah, 14 kilometres north-east of Damascus.

In order to disrupt the redeployment of reserve units of the Syrian armed forces, group leaders instructed fighters to fire along the line of contact. Disagreements between Nusrah Front fighters and the local population of Ayn Tarma, 2 kilometres east of Damascus, escalated into an armed confrontation. In order to suppress the ability of residents to take action and to prevent their escape to areas under

government control, the field commanders organized the redeployment of additional armed gangs.

The above facts confirm our position that external sponsors are not engaging with, or are unable to engage with, the armed groups under their tutelage. This means that they are collectively responsible for the violations of Security Council resolution 2401 (2018). As developments have shown, the letter addressed to you and the President of the Security Council from the leaders of three groups, regarding their readiness to observe the truce, expel Nusrah Front terrorists and not impede humanitarian operations, was a deceptive and diversionary tactic. Attempts to make it appear that Moscow is solely responsible for the implementation of the resolution are a dishonest and politicized approach that conceals unscrupulous plans to overthrow the Syrian regime.

Rather than preserving a situation in which terrorists would thrive, we are convinced that decisive progress is now needed to restore peace and unity to the country through a political settlement, based on Security Council resolution 2254 (2015) and the outcome of the Congress of the Syrian National Dialogue held in Sochi, Russian Federation.

It should be clear to all that no solution will be found as long as there are concerted efforts to fragment Syrian territory, remove parts of it from the jurisdiction of Damascus and create parallel authority structures. We demand that the ideologues of such projects abandon this destructive practice, which violates the Charter of the United Nations and relevant Security Council resolutions. We consider it unacceptable to make the provision of economic assistance for the reconstruction of Syria dependent on various artificial pretexts, including political transformations that can be achieved only through an intra-Syrian dialogue.

I should be grateful if the present letter could be circulated as a document of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) V. **Nebenzia**